

# Traveling Space-A

*With patience and luck, a free trip could be the prize*

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photo by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

## Tips for the traveler

Remember, traveling Space-A can cost a few bucks. Box lunches can cost about \$3.

At some overseas locations, terminals must collect a "head tax" or a federal inspection fee, though it's not much, said Master Sgt. Ordena Willis. He's the noncommissioned officer in charge of passenger operations for Air Mobility Command's passenger policy branch.

"It's still a great deal. Your best bet is to travel during non-peak periods, you'll find the terminals less congested and fewer people trying to fly space-A. There should be more seats available," he said. "But holidays and the summer are the more difficult travel times."

Here are other things to consider:

- Be flexible and patient.
- Have a backup plan; money for a rental car or commercial airline ticket home.
- Bring plenty of items to keep you entertained during long wait times.
- Stay with friends along the way and avoid expensive hotels.
- Get educated. Visit Space-A Web sites for rules, tips and contact info for different bases.
- Question local passenger service representatives.
- Pick the brain of a retiree who has years of Space-A experience.

Hundreds of military I.D. cardholders take advantage of a special military benefit that allows a free ride on military aircraft and charters. They're bound for Germany, Hawaii, Japan and exotic locations such as New Zealand for fun and adventure. But there's a catch. Travelers need a generous amount of patience and flexibility.

It's called Space-A, for space available, and most travelers don't have to spend a dime.

Staff Sgt. Alana Green used her space-a privilege for the first time to travel from San Antonio to Washington to spend the holidays with her family. She seemed apprehensive sitting in the passenger service terminal playroom with her 20-month-old son, Auden. They were waiting to board a C-5 Galaxy bound for Travis Air Force Base, Calif.

But she had followed some primary Space-A travel rules. If she couldn't make a connecting flight to McChord Air Force Base, Wash., the same day, she had a network of family members ready to take her in until a flight opened up.

She also allotted herself three weeks of leave for a two-week stay just in case she needed the extra days to hop back home — since Space-A isn't a guaranteed process. And in a worst-case scenario, she had cash to buy a commercial return ticket, if needed.

## Trials and tribulations

John Lundeby would probably give her high marks. As acting chief of the passenger policy branch for Air Mobility Command, he knows the ins and outs of Space-A travel. And he's fully aware of the trials and tribulations of the Defense Department policy that encourages eligible

I.D. cardholders to take advantage of this "quality of life benefit."

"We encourage people to fly Space-A. But we also encourage them to have a plan, be flexible and set funds aside," Mr. Lundeby said.

Each year thousands of active duty, family members, retirees, students, cadets and teachers are able to take advantage of excess seats on military aircraft through Space-A. They hop on cargo planes, tankers and commercial charters bound for Australia, Ecuador, Germany, Hawaii, Italy, New Zealand, Singapore and Central and South America. Unfortunately though, loved ones who miss their deployed spouse or child and ask to fly Space-A on a plane headed for Baghdad or Kuwait are not allowed, said Mr. Lundeby.

For many, flying Space-A is an adventurous way of tramping around the world. But for Pearl Willette it was more of a matter of money. She wanted to attend a wedding in Cancun, Mexico, but lives at Camp Foster, Japan, with her Marine husband and three children. Getting there by commercial air would have meant more than \$10,000 for a family of five.

Instead, they flew Space-A from Kadena Air Base, Japan, to Los Angeles on the "Patriot Express," a military charter. The civilian airliner is used for permanent change of station moves and for temporary duty. But if seats are available, it's first-come,



first-served based on movement categories, for those who meet Space-A travel requirements. In L.A., the Willettes rented a car, drove to Houston and flew commercial to Cancun.

The family was on its way home at the Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, passenger terminal waiting with Sergeant Green to board the C-5 to Travis. From there, their goal was to make connections to Hawaii, Guam, South Korea and finally home. They were tired but none the worse for wear considering the long hours spent in “pax” terminals. Their kids napped on the floor.

Outside of sleeping the time away, Mrs. Willette has found other ways to keep her family entertained during long waiting periods. She suggests parents have a new toy their children can open up on the plane, and plenty of books, CDs, electronic games — and motion sickness medicine, just in case.

### Going the distance

Part of the Willettes’ success in procuring seats was that they traveled Category 2. There are six Space-A categories to prioritize seat assignment. Category 1 is for those on emergency leave. Category 2 is for people, like the Willettes, on environmental morale leave. Category 3 is for active duty on leave, foreign military members and Medal of Honor recipients.

Category 6 included military retiree Vincent Lamm and his wife, Magda, who were attempting a hop to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, to visit their son for Christmas. The 85-year-old retired Soldier was optimistic about getting seats. He should know. The former master sergeant has been on the Space-A go since retiring in Hawaii in 1975, where he became a creative writing and English teacher at a community college.

“As soon as school was out, the boys and I took off,” he said. Their Space-A adventures took them to Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador and New Zealand. “We’ve had some fantastic experiences,” he said, calling Space-A, “the biggest fringe benefit the military member has.”

Mr. Lamm has a big advantage over his active duty Space-A counterparts — time. Although active duty members get 30 days of leave each year, their vacation time is more precious, he said. Some might not want to waste it waiting in pax terminals.

But, he stressed the virtue of patience when traveling Space-A. A cargo plane can take off for one destination and change plans in mid-air due to mission requirements. Or the plane you’ve been waiting three days to board can be canceled at the last minute because of mechanical problems. Maybe the 20 seats listed as available for Space-A travelers will

disappear at the last minute if extra cargo shows up. He recalled a time sitting on a bus near an aircraft, waiting for the signal to board. The signal never came because the crew didn’t show. Someone forgot to give them a wake-up call.

“I’ve seen people break down and cry,” he said of the stress such travel can cause. And he’s seen “families battle each other” after days of hanging around a terminal waiting.

### Risky but worth it

“It’s risky but with a bit of planning you can make it work ... the name says everything,” said Senior Airman Emmanuel Monteau, a passenger service representative at Dover Air Force Base, Del. He’s assisted as many as 300 people a day heading to Germany aboard C-5s that can comfortably seat up to 73 passengers in the upper bay. Space-A travelers also should be prepared for a variety of seating, like the web seats stretched alongside the fuselage of a C-130 Hercules.

The Airman’s seen the look of anguish on the face of travelers whose aircraft experienced a mission change after waiting three or four days for it to launch. Others walk away disappointed because of a lack of preparation. First-time travelers often assume just because they signed up for Space-A, they have a reserved seat as if flying with American Airlines, he said.

“Always have a backup plan. Always be flexible,” he stressed.

He had a chance to practice what he preaches this year on his first Space-A attempt with his girlfriend. He had the flight picked out from Dover to Germany, but its mission changed and wasn’t a viable option. A little research revealed another flight departing from McGuire Air Force Base, N.J., which they caught and successfully pulled off their vacation in Paris.

“Although Space-A has some ups and downs, it’s a good opportunity. Don’t let one bad experience ruin it for you,” he said. ☺



**For more information on travel categories and eligibility:** <http://public.amc.af.mil/Library/SPACEA/spacea.htm>